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TAGS: PGOV MOPS TU IZ

SUBJECT: TURKEY: MILITARY LASHES OUT AT OPPOSITION IN
AFTERMATH OF IRAQ WITHDRAWAL

Classified By: Pol-Mil Counselor Carl Siebentritt for reasons 1.4 (b) a
nd (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: In an ironic twist, controversy over the Turkish military's pull-out from Iraq has pitted the Turkish General Staff (TGS) against its erstwhile political allies, the Republican People's Party (CHP), and has driven the TGS closer to PM Erdogan's Justice and Development Party (AKP) government. In a statement posted on its website March 4, the Turkish General Staff (TGS) sharply rebuked the opposition for its assertion that Turkish military forces were withdrawn from northern Iraq prematurely because of political pressure from the U.S. TGS again defended the timing of the February 29 withdrawal, charging that the criticism was the first of its kind in the 24-year war against terrorism and suggesting it was "traitorous." Meanwhile, Prime Minister Erdogan has publicly praised the military for its conduct of the operation. The TGS and Nationalist Action Party (MHP) have already been estranged over MHP's conditional support to the AKP government on the issue of whether women should be allowed to wear headscarves at universities. End summary.

Opposition Criticizes the Military

¶2. (U) CHP leader Deniz Baykal has charged that the withdrawal of Turkish troops from northern Iraq was premature and driven by political pressure from the U.S. Speaking on television March 3, Baykal said that he does not accept the argument that Turkey withdrew of its own volition. At his party's group meeting in Parliament on March 4, Baykal called the end of the operation a "surprise to the world," and stated that Turkish troops should not have been pulled back until the job was done. If the objectives of the operation had been met by February 28, he asked rhetorically, why had not the TGS or Prime Minister informed visiting U.S. Secretary of Defense Gates on that date? He charged that TGS

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had not informed the political leadership about the withdrawal in advance, and that the government was "a mere observer of the scene." CHP has since tried to back-peddle, claiming its criticism was aimed not at TGS, but at the government.

¶3. (U) Addressing his parliamentary group on March 4, MHP leader Devlet Bahceli said that the sudden end to the land

operation in northern Iraq "caused surprise and disappointment." He accused TGS of legitimizing the PKK as a military force by describing PKK facilities as "command and control centers" and "correspondence and logistical installations." He charged that the AKP had given a blank check to the U.S. and its kowtowing had unmasked the Prime Minister. Bahceli lamented that the Turkish public had learned of the withdrawal from the spokesman of the northern Iraqi administration, and not the GOT, and charged there was a serious communication problem among state institutions.

TGS: Opposition Criticism "More Harmful than Traitors"

¶4. (U) In a sharply worded rebuke, the TGS web statement referred to Chief of General Staff GEN Yasar Buyukanit's detailed explanation of the effectiveness of the seven-day cross-border operation against PKK terrorist bases inside northern Iraq made in an extraordinary March 3 press conference at TGS. In that press conference, GEN Buyukanit went to great lengths to explain that the Turkish withdrawal was purely a military decision, taken in coordination with all relevant state offices but without any foreign or domestic political influence, and that the military objectives of the operation had been fully met. He decried suggestions that the U.S. had influenced the TGS decision to pull troops back, charging that such allegations had wounded the military, constituted a basic attack on the Turkish republic itself, and showed disrespect for the blood shed by Turkish soldiers.

¶5. (U) The TGS web statement evaluated the criticism of the Turkish Armed Forces by "non-media groups" as "unfair and worthless attacks" against the institution fighting terrorism and sacrificing lives for the country. The military, the statement said, has never desired "to get into a polemic" with political figures or institutions, and has been targeted with such criticism for the first time in its 24-year fight against PKK terrorism. The attacks have harmed the determination of the Turkish Armed Forces in the fight against terrorism "more than traitors." The TGS, the statement concludes, leaves the assessment of the criticism "to the common sense of the Turkish nation."

PM Erdogan Praises the Military

¶6. (U) Meanwhile, Prime Minister Erdogan has defended the military for its conduct of the ground operation in northern Iraq. In a March 4 AKP parliamentary meeting, Erdogan heaped praise on the troops for their success, congratulated all members of the armed forces, "from the CHOD to the conscripts," and pointedly noted that no civilians were harmed as the army carried out "a very successful operation under very difficult circumstances." Erdogan warned the opposition against criticism of the military for early withdrawal and challenged the opposition to address its complaints to the government, not the TGS.

Comment: Strange Bedfellows

¶7. (C) The announcement of the withdrawal of Turkish forces from northern Iraq one day after the first visit to Ankara by a U.S. Secretary of Defense in over seven years has ignited a firestorm of political recriminations. Despite extraordinary TGS efforts to explain away the coincidence, much of the Turkish public, including a number of our contacts, are not buying it. The opposition, genuinely disappointed with the unexpected withdrawal, sees a chance to exploit the perception of a misstep and to profile themselves as strongest on national security and the true defenders of Turkish honor. But in attacking the government here they have attacked the military as well. The intensity of the latest salvos between the CHP and TGS brings the animosity between these two seemingly natural ideological allies, which

flared during and since the 2007 elections, to new heights and makes the TGS and AKP appear like allies. It is unlikely that any AKP-TGS temporary alliance will solve the basic underlying ideological tensions between the two and lead to a more lasting civil-military dtente.

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